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Perspectives on the Future of Behavior Analysis: Introductory Comments

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The three papers in this special section are written versions of talks presented as part of a panel discussion at the 2009 Association for Behavior Analysis International annual convention in Phoenix, Arizona. The panel discussion, titled ''Future Perspectives of Behavior Analysis'' and presented as part of the professional development series, was organized and chaired by Timothy C. Fuller and featured talks by Patrick C. Friman, David C. Palmer, and Alan D. Poling. All three talks were entertaining and provocative and stirred a lot of discussion, some of it heated.

As an audience member and associate editor of *The Behavior Analyst* (*TBA*), I immediately realized that these were important talks for our field presented by three of its best thinkers and that a broader audience needed to hear them. Consequently, soon after the convention ended, I invited each presenter to submit a written version of his talk for a special section of *TBA* on the future of behavior analysis.

In the panel discussion, Alan Poling presented first, followed by Patrick Friman and then David Palmer. For this special section, we are following the same order although the papers could be printed in any order. The papers are written in a more readable first-person style than most journal articles (as they were read in the panel discussion) which, I think, increases their accessibility. Each paper takes a different perspective on the current status and future of behavior analysis. However, to varying degrees, all three papers note concerns about behavior analysis that, if left unchecked, do not augur well for a healthy future. But each of the papers tempers any implicit pessimism with suggestions for how we behavior analysts can influence the evolution of our field experimentally, practically, and theoretically.

It may be the case, however, that we cannot shape the developmental course of our field, and that, like evolution by natural selection at the biological level, the evolution of the practice of behavior analysis, whether in research or application, is subject only to selection by the culture. Rather than surrender to that somewhat fatalistic view, the three papers that comprise this special section offer suggestions for things we can do to increase variations in the practice of behavior analysis that might lead to greater chances of cultural selection.

THE PAPERS

Poling lists five concerns about the current nature of our field and offers some suggestions for how we might change our collective behavior to ensure that our discipline not only survives but also prospers. One of his concerns is that much basic research in the experimental analysis of behavior (EAB, which nowadays, according to Poling, stands for ''esoteric behavior analysis'') is ''not obviously relevant to significant actions of people and other animals in their natural environments'' (p. 9).

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Palmer suggests that one way we can address this problem is to tackle interesting but complex behaviors, such as relational responding, visual recall, or judgments of identity, by expanding our repertoire of experimental and analytical methods beyond the standard operant methodology to include some from mainstream psychology.

All three authors point out or imply another problem, namely that we behavior analysts not only are few but are limited in our influence and impact on the greater community including those entrusted with understanding human behavior. Essentially, we have done a poor job of selling our discipline.

Poling and Friman describe another problem, namely the increasingly inescapable fact that behavior analysis is becoming synonymous with autism treatment in particular and developmental disabilities in general. As selectionists, we understand perhaps better than anyone why this is so: Behavior analysis offers the only scientifically documented treatment for people diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) and related disabilities. As a result, and because the diagnosis of autism has mushroomed along with money for services, applied behavior analysts who treat individuals with autism have multiplied in the last several years.

Here in California, the social and monetary contingencies have created a system wherein a lot of money is available through regional centers to private vendors providing applied behavior-analytic services to families of children with ASDs. This has created a market for low-level behavioral technicians who are the foot soldiers in this effort. As a result, students who graduate from colleges and universities in California with undergraduate degrees, many in psychology, and who are unable to find jobs related to their discipline, are able to find employment at agencies contracted by the regional centers to provide applied behavior-analytic services. This situation has been a boon to the practice of applied behavior analysis in California, introducing it to many students who never learned about it in college.

After working at an agency for varying lengths of time, many of these students begin to look for graduate programs specifically in applied behavior analysis. Most do this because they want to become board certified behavior analysts so they can have a greater impact and—let's face it—can earn more money.

This demand for graduate work in applied behavior analysis has benefited the field in general as well as me personally. I gave up a full-time tenured faculty position at Western New England College in 1998 and moved to California. After teaching for several years in part-time positions at several universities, I was finally hired by the Psychology Department at California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA), in part to coordinate the graduate program in applied behavior analysis. A mere 2 years later, because of the continued demand for graduate instruction in applied behavior analysis, we hired another behavior analyst, the first time the department was able to do that in the almost 20-year history of the program. Other CSU campuses have experienced the same kind of growth, and other programs (e.g., the Chicago School for Professional Psychology) have opened campuses in California to meet the growing demand for graduate training in applied behavior analysis. I suspect something similar has happened in other cities across the country. All because of autism.

But the autism phenomenon is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it has provided the field with an infusion of practitioners that normally only happens when undergraduate students at colleges and universities are introduced to a disci-

pline that turns them on such that they want to continue their studies in graduate school. For behavior analysis, this trend has happened in reverse. Most of our graduate students are introduced to behavior analysis in their jobs, are excited by the same features of it that attracted me years ago, and then look for graduate programs to pursue their interest.

Unfortunately, relatively few of these students pursue doctoral degrees, and even fewer become academicians. Thus, we are implicitly relying almost exclusively on autism to generate future behavior analysts, although very few will have doctoral degrees and be in positions within academia to breed new generations. Moreover, most of these practitioners are being trained in applied behavior analysis by the agencies where they are employed and, consequently, are learning sometimes inaccurate, distorted, and often idiosyncratic versions of the discipline. In fact, in my experience, many of these practitioners do not even know that the discipline is called behavior analysis; they think the field is called applied behavior analysis and it is not until they matriculate in a graduate program that they learn that applied behavior analysis is only one branch of a more unified, coherent experimental and theoretical science.

If scientists discovered a cure for autism or, as Poling suggests in his paper, if a drug were suddenly discovered to treat autism, we behavior analysts would be largely out of business, even though, as Poling notes, ''The poorly behaved, like the poor, are with us always'' (p. 16). Because a cure for autism is probably not right around the corner, applied behavior analysts will continue to be in demand. In the near term this is not a bad thing for the field. But, unless we encourage more individuals to pursue doctoral degrees and then academic positions as well as to branch out in the applications of our science, we run the risk of becoming even more irrelevant in the larger culture than we are now.

Poling quotes one of his mentors, Travis Thompson, in saying that behavior analysts should ''find a disease'' in the sense of finding an area of intervention and research that the taxpayers value and would support. Although autism fits that requirement at the present time, both Poling and Friman argue that we should find other diseases.

In his paper, Friman offers one area of huge importance to the culture that has been largely untapped by behavior analysts (except by Friman and a few others), namely, pediatric primary care. Friman illustrates how behavior analysts can ''achieve mainstream relevance'' with the example of behavioral treatment of diurnal enuresis. As he notes, ''Successfully integrating with primary care would require no new conceptual tools, no new scientific discoveries; in fact, it could be accomplished with two or three principles of behavior and a handful of applications'' (p. 20). Friman goes on to suggest that tackling diurnal enuresis, as just one example of a ''disease'' in Travis Thompson's sense of the word, means that behavior analysts could conduct research and publish at least some of it in pediatric medical journals, as Friman has done, as well as collaborate with physicians, which would result in referrals of children with such problems to behavior analysts for treatment.

It could be argued that the psychological community has been willing to concede autism and developmental disabilities to behavior analysts, so that mainstream psychologists can own the more interesting phenomena: memory, cognition, consciousness, language, problem solving, social behavior, and infant and child development. Moreover, behavior analysts have been criticized, perhaps unjustly, for not addressing

these important aspects of human existence. (Behavior analysts have addressed many of these issues, however, mostly within the confines of our own journals, which, for the most part, do not enjoy wide dissemination outside our field.) These are indeed important problems to tackle, many of which do not lend themselves to experimental analysis for a variety of reasons. For one, as Palmer notes, "outside the laboratory, it is commonly the case that behavior is determined by multiple variables, perhaps coming together for the first time" (p. 42). Thus, Palmer suggests that behavior analysts might advance by adopting experimental procedures and dependent variables that have been used primarily by non-behavior analysts, such as eye movements and response latency. Within our own field, Palmer suggests that we more fully explore the role of joint control in understanding complex behavior.

Thus, the three papers that comprise this special section offer suggestions for different ways we behavior analysts might branch out from our relatively insulated world in which, although many of us are happy, we are possibly too few for our discipline to survive.

THE AUTHORS

Some readers might wonder why these three authors should be given this platform from which to preach to the rest of us about the future of our field. Even if the authors had not participated in a panel discussion on the topic, I would submit that each of them has earned the right to this position.

Al Poling has contributed to the experimental, applied, theoretical, and methodological aspects of behavior analysis over the last 30 years, publishing on a wide range of topics in over 40 different journals. He has not pigeonholed himself, a luxury afforded to one in an academic setting. In the past year, Poling extended his already wide-ranging repertoire by applying for and then accepting a job directing a project in Tanzania in which giant African pouched rats (*Cricetomys gambianus*) are trained, using operant principles, to sniff out land mines and, amazingly, tuberculosis. This particular project is not applied behavior analysis per se because it is not intended to improve the lives of the rats, but it is an elegant application of the principles and procedures of behavior analysis to socially important problems. When one considers the ramifications of this project, the possibilities for other applications multiply exponentially.

For years Pat Friman has worked in the area of pediatric care, applying operant principles and procedures to socially significant problems that, as he points out, are common in the population. He is the Director of the Boys Town Center for Behavioral Health, one major component of which is the Outpatient Behavioral Pediatric Clinic. The clinic serves about 1,700 typically developing children with behavior problems and their families each year. The primary referral sources for these children are primary care physicians to whom Friman has reached out. The primary treatments are derived from behavior-analytic principles. Friman and his students, interns, and postdoctoral fellows have established similar clinics in locations across the country, including Fort Myers, Florida; Reno, Nevada; Lincoln, Nebraska; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He believes there could be one in your town too.

For as long as I have known him, Dave Palmer has promoted the utility of scientific interpretation as an important strategy in behavior analysis. As he notes in this paper, "The strategy adopted by behavior analysis is that of all other sciences, namely, to study nature closely whenever possible, to extract general principles from that study, and to extrapolate

to domains in which experimental control is less congenial'' (p. 38). He has consistently pointed out that scientific interpretation grounded in a foundation of experimentally derived principles has precedent in the natural sciences and should be an important analytical tool for behavior analysts, especially to understand behaviors that are either too complex for experimental analysis or beyond the instruments of observation. He has modeled for us ways we can understand, at the microscopic behavioral level, such complex topics as memory, cognition, verbal behavior, and problem solving.

Thus, the three authors in this special section regularly put their money where there mouths are. But they are not alone. Many other behavior analysts work diligently to behavioralize the world, as Dick Malott puts it. But because we are so few, the burden is an onerous one. The trick, of course, is to design environments that will encourage the practices suggested by these authors.

Simply put, our survival depends in large part on developing more behavior analysts. To do that, we desperately need to increase the variation in our field and then hope that some of that is selected by the larger culture. I believe that one critical way we can accomplish this is to get more behavior analysts in academic positions. It has been my experience that many students find a natural science approach to behavior a very attractive alternative to more traditional psychological approaches. But too few are exposed to a natural science or behavioral perspective.

In my view, the authors of the three perspectives on the future of behavior analysis offer very keen and accurate observations of our field, and because of their eminence and their track records of doing what they are urging us to do, I hope the readers of this journal take their diagnoses and prescriptions seriously and make a concerted effort to do what they can to achieve the mainstream relevance that we all wish for.

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